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ABSTRACT

Because cohabitation generally begins casually with no explicit understanding and because there are few outside pressures holding the couple together, it would seem that this type of living arrangement would be characterized by brevity; this is not the case. Since cohabitation arrangements are generally not brief but long lasting, their investigation should help clarify the nature of the cohesion of couples, whether cohabiting or married. It was found that couples advanced along a hierarchy of commitment, in which each step was evidence of a given level of commitment and in time lost its potency as commitment evidence as the relationship became more intense and additional evidence was sought. Cohabitants had to decide if they would be sexually exclusive and thereby give evidence of commitment or if they should be nonexclusive so as to realize growth through sexual expression. Generally, their resolution was to give lip service to sexual nonexclusivity but to practice self-restricted sexual exclusivity. In this way, sexual exclusivity was added to the means available for proving commitment, and the cohabitants could still see themselves as sexually free. Shortlived cohabitant relationships were impermanent because expected commitment evidence was not forthcoming, and it became apparent to one of the cohabitants that the partner was holding back. (Author)

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COMMITMENT AND COHABITATION COHESION

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An important question, possibly the most important one relative to the sociology of the family, is: What is there that keeps a family together? Stated in another way: How is the family, seen as people in interaction, possible at all? This paper is addressed to that question.

With a few notable exceptions such as Ralph Turner's consideration of bonds, Talcott Parsons' ideas on role complementarity, and Bernard Farber's concern with commitment, this important question of family cohesion has neither been directly asked nor answered. Sociologists have investigated matters of homogamy, complementary needs, and value consensus. These studies have been helpful in indicating variables that are related to long term associations but they do not show how longevity is promoted by characteristics of family interaction.

My approach in this paper is to view variables such as homogamy as being helpful or even necessary to long term relationships but these variables are not sufficient in themselves. With the assumption that these variables are at best necessary, the way is made clear to consider what, if anything, is sufficient to a relationship of length.

I believe that evidence of commitment is sufficient for a long term relationship. Commitment is defined as a person's engagement of self in a particular relationship.

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This engagement of self has three dimensions. The first is pledge which is seen as the acknowledgement of one's responsibility. Secondly, there is the investment of self which concerns a willingness to give time, energy, and interest. The third part of self-engagement is involvement, a readiness to participate in the relationship in a positive and supportive way. Evidence of commitment demonstrates a belief that a particular relationship is viable. So, the important question now becomes: If long term relationships require commitment and this commitment must be manifest to further a relationship, what is the evidence which demonstrates that a person is committed to a particular relationship?

Because of the nature of commitment, it is most accurately seen as an attitude, its existence can best be determined through some outward manifestation. Married people give evidence of commitment in many ways. For example, they have children together, they make long range plans, and they work together to solve problems. But married people are supposed to stay together and although the supposition of permanence is frequently false, the expectancy of "til death do us part" is present and the difficulties, especially the legal ones, of marital dissolution encourage relationships of length. Encouragement such as this adds external pressure that is not the result of commitment. I reasoned that if commitment and its effect could be separated from such external expectations and legalities, the effect of commitment

could be more clearly seen and its importance more accurately determined.

One of the ideas that grew out of recent research was that a study of cohabitation presented such an opportunity. A condition of cohabitation exists when two cross-sex individuals live together in what is essentially a full-time way and they define themselves as a couple. By full-time is meant that they share the same domicile and together they make decisions relative to important matters such as their division of labor, where they will live, and their resource allocation.

Since cohabitants have fewer external unifiers, cohesion must come more from within. Moreover, internally generated cohesion needs to be more powerful because cohabitation is a more easily voidable type of relationship than is marriage. Evidence of commitment takes on new importance; it is essential for without commitment there is, ostensibly, no reason for a couple's staying together.

This perspective of potential voidability gives cohabitants what Bernard Farber called a permanent availability orientation. As a type of permanent availability family, cohabitation couples stay together only as long as they feel a stronger commitment toward each other than they feel elsewhere. Their relationship is voluntary, it is voidable. This perspective of tentativeness would seem to generate a high rate of cohabitant dissolution and a view among cohabitants that their relationships were impermanent. Such does not appear to be the case. No data exist relative to

the rate of cohabitant dissolution but in almost all the relationships that I studied, forty-seven in all, cohabitants perceived their relationship as permanent. This perception of permanence, I believe, is the product of both the need for commitment and evidence that this commitment exists. Because of the importance of the evidence of commitment, commitment is made manifest and the relationship is strengthened. As a result of the strength, relationships are seen as permanent and dissolution becomes more difficult to consider.

The problem that this paper is concerned with is how cohabitant commitment builds a cohesive couple out of two individuals whose relationship is initially based on norms of impermanence. To explore this problem, I will explain the hierarchy of cohabitant commitment, discuss commitment relative to the way that cohabitants handle sexual matters and briefly, deal with cohabitant relationships that are short lived.

The hierarchy of cohabitant commitment. With the cohabitants of my research, in almost every instance, cohabitation was begun with a remarkable degree of casualness. Frequently, there were no explicit plans or understandings. This casualness is the product, it seems to me, of the need of young people for close relationships and personal involvement, their permissive attitudes toward sex, and their desire to place sex into a diffuse relationship. In addition, their experimental attitude toward life and their openness toward other people help promote this casualness. Cohabitation is encouraged by the participants'

initial perception of the relationship as tentative. Despite a beginning that was notable for its casualness, most cohabitants when interviewed perceived their relationship in a serious way as part of a permanent association. To change a relationship from a casual one to one of seriousness requires an extensive change in definition. Each step in the changing of this definition requires that the view of greater permanence be worthwhile. Evidence of the other's commitment was that assurance. Lacking the assurance provided by the evidence of commitment, the relationship did not go beyond the casual stage and it was dissolved. This was agreeable to a small minority who wanted only a brief encounter but most other cohabitants had only short term expectations at the beginning, yet when interviewed they were in a relationship of length. This change was accomplished through the escalation of commitment.

The view just expressed implies the existence of dynamic relationships. This dynamic nature means that a deepening relationship will require a progressively greater commitment. Since commitment is crucial to the relationship's ongoing development, it follows that the expression of commitment should change. There must be an escalation of commitment if the relationship is to be continually strengthened. With cohabitants, this was found to be true and there were several common means of making commitment evident. Starting with the least involving and ascending a hierarchy of relative force, the commitments expressed by cohabitants were as follows:

Sharing fun and pleasant social activity

Limiting of social activity to the one other person

Establishment of joint residence

Sharing of activities necessary for the continuation of the relationship. For example, the sharing of household tasks

Sharing expenses

Working out personal problems in ways that strengthen the relationship

The making of marriage plans

Marriage

Having children.

Some comments on the list are necessary. Sexual intimacy is too broad to be included in the hierarchy and it is discussed later in its own right. Secondly, although not all the cohabitants expressed their commitment in these ways, most cohabitants employed these methods of indicating their commitment and they employed them in approximately this order.

A general kind of evidence of commitment, not included in the foregoing hierarchy because of its scope, is the commitment that is made evident by a cohabitant's continued presence. This is an omnipresent proof of commitment and, because it is pervasive, it is a constant reinforcement to the relationship. When the association is grim, continued presence is very real piece of commitment evidence. Commitment is obvious if a person continues to live with another when he or she is free to leave. This is especially the case when the compromises that are a part of the relationship are ones of great moment and sacrifice.

The commitment hierarchy takes people deeper and deeper into their relationship and the result is that a permanent relationship develops out of one that was entered into because of a desire for a temporary one.

Sexual exclusivity as commitment. The contention that cohabitation was entered into primarily to obtain sexual gratification is of doubtful accuracy. Its accuracy is rendered dubious by three facts. The first fact is related to cohabitant non-virginity. With one exception, all cohabitants had sexual intercourse prior to the beginning of their life together. About one fourth of the cohabitants had coitus only with the person who later became their cohabitant partner.

The second fact is the wide variation between sexual intercourse and the start of cohabitation. Some had intercourse prior to their living together and at a place far removed from the site of their cohabitation. For some, sexual intimacy grew along with their living together. Others had intercourse with each other for the first time days and even weeks after they started living together. There was one couple who had no sexual intercourse at all. Overall, such a wide variation existed that no pattern was ascertainable.

In the third place, no cohabitant gained sexual advantage from cohabitation if advantage is defined as a variety of partners. I got the definite impression that prior to cohabitation, most participants found sexual gratification relatively easy to obtain, and a majority had sexual inter-

course with several or more partners. Cohabitants were not satisfied with this. They wanted genuine intimacy with copulation, a diffuse relationship rather than mere genital contact. After starting cohabitation only five individuals had coitus with someone other than their cohabitant partner.

With these preliminary matters out of the way, let's consider sexual exclusivity and commitment. The cohabitants maintained a permanent availability orientation relative to sexual activity. That means that they were not concerned with sexual activity in itself, but that they believed the appropriateness of the sexual act to be relative to other considerations. There was a very small minority of couples of which both members agreed that either cohabitant's going outside the pair for sexual gratification would be sufficient ground for dissolution of the relationship. There were several other couples with one member, generally the female, who believed that sexual exclusivity was vital to the continuation of the relationship. These couples were exceptions. Overall extra-cohabitant sexual activity ranked after loss of love, mutual boredom, changed personalities, sexual incompatibility, and the necessity of one member to leave the area and the other to stay, in the frequency of its mention as a reason for dissolving the relationship. Most couples agreed that if extra-cohabitant sexual activity were to occur, it would indicate that there was something in the relationship that needed investigation and correction. A great many said that sexual activity outside the pair would be allowable under certain conditions, the most frequently mentioned of these

was a long separation. There was a large percentage of cohabitants who believed that extra-cohabitant sexual activity should be allowed.

These views concerning sexual activity indicate that the cohabitants have what Bernard Farber calls a home and welfare orientation. With this orientation, they are concerned with the welfare of family members, their emotional well being, and their growth as persons. Many participants saw sexual activity as a means of growth and they believed that, ideally at least, they should be able to handle it.

On the other hand, the tentativeness of the relationship, because of its orientation toward permanent availability, required evidence of commitment. To allow another person exclusive sexual rights is to give evidence of commitment. This particular evidence is more impressive if continence is on the basis of self limitation rather than if it is somehow forced.

So they have a problem. Which will it be? Continence-as-commitment or sexual-freedom-for-growth. It can't be both ways.

The resolution of this dilemma was accomplished in several ways. One of these ways was an accentuation of the companionship and commitment aspects and the minimization of sexual freedom. In this situation, the ongoing relationship was contingent on sexual exclusivity. This approach was employed by the more traditional participants, especially women in student couples.

Another way to resolve the problem was to consider personal growth and freedom to be important and to minimize

the importance of sexual activity as evidence of commitment. An important part of this attitude was the idea that sex is simply not very important.

The third way that the problem was handled was by making sexual freedom ideally available with little or no restriction and, at the same time, having each person restrict his own sexual activity. The result was support for home and welfare considerations as lip service was given the importance of personal growth through sex and yet, with the self restriction, the need for commitment reinforcement was met.

This solution was the general one and this is made evident by the fact that, even with their stated openness and freedom, cohabitants maintained sexual exclusivity. As mentioned previously, there were only five of the sixty-two participants who were interviewed while currently in cohabitant relationships who said that they had been involved in extra-cohabitant sexual relations. Both members of one couple had sexual intercourse with other people and there were three other couples of whom one member only had extra-cohabitant sexual relations. These were two women and one man. Of these five, only the couple actively sought extra-cohabitant sexual activity. For the other three people, the sexual activity was limited to one, or at the most two instances.

The longer the duration of the cohabitant relationship, the less likely were the participants to indicate attitudes of concern about sexual exclusivity. The change took place in the attitudes of women as the men never indicated much concern over this aspect of the relationship.

As an aside, as more married couples begin to see their relationships in terms of permanent availability and home and welfare orientations become more common, there is the possibility that married people will take on this attitude of permissiveness with self limitation. This will be especially the case as sexual activity becomes defined as an area with potential for personal growth.

Short-lived cohabitant relationships. The final section of this paper concerns cohabitant relationships that are not long lasting. Part of my research concerned people who were no longer in cohabitant relationships. The reasons that were given for the dissolution of cohabitant relationships varied. Some of the participants referred to problems generated by a lack of maturity or incompatibility or differences in sexual values. Most participants indicated that the problems were internal ones, that dissolution was not engendered by such matters as financial problems or difficulties with school of job. Problems of interaction can be worked out if there is a belief that the solving of the problems is worthwhile. Whether the solving of the problems is worthwhile or not depends on the perceived overall quality and viability of the relationship. As stated before, a belief in the viability depends upon the partner's evidence of commitment. That this evidence was not forthcoming indicated that efforts to solve problems of interaction were not worth the effort.

For example, I interviewed one couple as the woman was in the process of moving out. They had lived together for a long time and the interview was conducted in the midst of boxes made ready for her departure. This relationship did not last because of a lack of evidence of commitment. They both said as much. She said:

> I guess it was never a very strong relationship. When I became pregnant, all that he did was take care of the details.

When I asked her what else she expected, she replied:

> Well, I thought that marriage or something should happen that would show a real concern for me.

In talking to her cohabitant, he said about the same thing. He said:

> I should have married her then, when she was pregnant. She would have married me. I asked her when she started talking about leaving but then it was too late. There comes a time when you either let them go or marry them. The relationship cannot exist in a state of cohabitation. There is no set upper time limit, that depends on the people, but somewhere along the line there has to be the marriage. It is essential to stay together for a long time.

This is what I'm saying. Cohabitation cohesion requires evidence of commitment. With acceptable levels of homogamy and compatibility, the manifestation of commitment is necessary and sufficient to an ongoing relationship. As long as progressively greater commitment is made evident, the relationship will intensify. Without it, the relationship is vulnerable and it will not intensify and, with no intensification, it will not last.